

MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION (MOHE): QUALITY ASSURANCE ON EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Quality Assurance is considered as a new area of concern among education practitioners in Malaysia. In the past, Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) place little stress on the importance of having quality assurance among its higher education institutions. The last few years since quality assurance has become a top-notch issue in the world arena of education, MOHE started to paddle up speedily towards achieving the standard of quality recognizable globally. An accreditation such as MQA (Malaysia Qualifications Agency), formerly known as LAN (Lembaga Akreditasi Negara) or National Accreditation Board was introduced. It is expected that the MQA accreditation will guide the Malaysian higher education system in improving the quality of education rendered to the public. Therefore, this informative paper will look at the quality assurance education: perspectives, current practice among education institutions, MOHE's roles and public expectation of quality education.

Keywords: quality assurance, MOHE, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The rising need of higher education or simply the demand for higher education is mainly due to the increasing demand for the nation quality human resources. This has prompted the Malaysian Government to deliver higher education through both public and private systems guarded by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). In the beginning, there was only one university was established after Malaysia gained independence in 1957. However, after putting through a few plans which concentrated on economic, socioeconomic, manufacturing, industry and services development, Malaysia has taken a major step in shifting its emphasis on producing highly technology, skillful and knowledgeable workers. Therefore, moving Malaysia towards this objective, there are now 20 public and 15 private universities currently operational under the approval of MOHE (Hassan Basri, 2008).

From the laymen perspectives, a total of 35 public and private universities will be enough to meet the increasing demand of professionals from the business and industry. Truthfully, the government is single-handed in catering the demand for higher education in Malaysia. Thus, currently there are about 600 private higher learning institutions-including 15 private universities in Malaysia- to complement the function of public institutions in providing for higher education among the society. In fact, in the last decade, the introduction of twinning program between local and foreign universities started to mushroom in the Malaysian education industry. In addition to this recent development, polytechnics was introduced in 1969 by the Government in providing training for engineering and commerce students who specialize in technical and vocational areas.

Throughout the development of the Higher Education institutions, the Government is committed financially by providing complete funding, offering scholarship and loan to needy students. The education standard of the Higher Education system is further strengthened by the support of the private sector where large industrial and service organizations were involved in providing students with the required job training facilities. The milestones in the education system are even speeded up by the concocted of the new Private Higher Education Act 1996. Through this act, major corporations in Malaysia were given licenses to operate Multimedia University, Universiti Teknologi Petronas, Universiti Tenaga Malaysia, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak and the Open University of Malaysia (Hassan Basri, 2008).

With this growing amount of Higher Education institutions in the market, MOHE is slapped with issues on the quality of education provided to the society. It is undeniable that both MOHE and education practitioners are concerned over the academic quality rendered by the Higher Education system. The Government has set up a national Quality Assurance system to facilitate the achievement of quality in the programs offered mainly in the timely manner as the criteria is structured and processed in the higher education system. Quality assurance is becoming an imperative issue that has been discussed by the government and the education institutions. Kotler et al. (2009) dictates that quality is clearly the key to value creation and customer satisfaction. Quality assurance started its roots in large-scale manufacturing companies (Allais, 2009). The Malaysian government somehow has adopted this idea and inculcated quality assurance in the education system. In general, quality assurance in an attempt to continuously improve the services offered by the service provider to further strengthened the education industry.

It is even proven that the external quality assurance mechanism implemented through accreditation, validation and audit by peer review is deemed effective to ascertain continuous improvement (Shuib et. al, 2007). Strictly, the education practitioners have to use the quality and standards set forth in the QA system as a guideline for all staff to comply. The question frequently asked is whether quality assurance can be associated with quality improvement. This is basically a question most researchers in the servqual field still dwelling on. Many of the findings of the study done on quality still have not given a definite answer on this issue. In this paper, the writers will not attempt to answer the question on Quality Assurance and Quality improvement but will look at quality assurance on education: perspectives, current practice among education institutions, MOHE's roles and public expectation of quality education. This paper will be a informative in nature as to familiarize the readers on quality education within the Malaysian Higher Education system.

PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY ASSURANCE (QA)

When discussing the issues on assuring quality in education, the two areas of concern will be on the academics and accountability of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). There are two different standpoints on these matters: the faculty and the Government.

Academic Quality

Traditionally, people looked at the higher education quality on the credibility and capability of its faculty: tough academic standards, productive research activity, full and varied curricula.

However, as for the academicians and administrators, quality in education is reinforced through sufficient financial resources and physical facilities as to realize a vibrant learning environment. Issues on basic academic values- autonomy of the institute, academic freedom and commitment to mission-based system-are openly debated among the faculty/education practitioners and the Government. Some believed that the faculty should have the autonomy to decide on the content of the curricula and academic standards. On the other word, the faculty should have the final say right up from what course to be offered to minimal task of students credit transfer. It is shown that the faculty is said to be responsible in defining the quality of higher education to students (Eaton, 2006).

On the other hand, the Government is concerned more on assessing the performance of colleges and universities through reports on graduation, job placement and retention rates. Mostly the Government depended heavily on the HEI to administer its expectations with good results. However, recent development has seen changes in the Government interest. It is no longer interested in results, but it also become judgmental in how the HEI operate within the education industry. The government would prefer a prescription on all academic matters from transfer of credit to student achievement. The Government wants to be involved in all of the steps taken by HEI as to assure the quality in academics is achieved (Eaton, 2006).

Accountability

Accountability is said to be closely linked to quality in academics. It often referred to self-responsibility and self-regulation of the academic quality. HEI is responsible to foresee that the programs offered by education institutions meet the quality expectations and they are meant to improve their programs over time. Therefore, the faculty and administrators within a university should have peer reviews on the quality of institutions and programs through standards, trust and judgment based system as to engage the institutions in continuous accreditation. Therefore, it is believed by HEI that through this manner they can assure quality to the higher educations. Indirectly, this means they are accountable to students and the public (Eaton, 2006).

Previously, the Government perceives accountability as performance and results. Now, it is more concerned on how HEI carries their academic responsibilities. It believes the HEI cornered with evidence of quality-faculty credential, structure of curriculum etc- that they sometimes fail to provide the evidence of the results which are deemed important to the Government. As a result , the Government has taken measures by diminishing the HEI self-regulatory accreditation and introduces its own accreditation where all HEI are required to follow the process as to ensure the role of accountability is high (Eaton, 2006).

CURRENT PRACTICE BY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia's higher education is a combination between public and private systems. Majorities are public universities whereas the rest are private universities. The objective of establishments of both private and public universities in Malaysia is to offer opportunities not only for Malaysian but also foreigner to pursue their study. Due to increasing numbers of these private and public universities, Government of Malaysia has been urged on the quality aspects of education.

Recognizing the increasing numbers of both private and public universities in Malaysia, greater emphasis have been made in order to strengthen the quality of education in Malaysia. It is the aspiration of MOHE to turn Malaysia into a center of excellence for higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.). It is also the ministry vision to enhance knowledge and capability in its higher education institution so that they are able to produce holistic students emotionally, spiritually and emotionally. The ministry is driven to take few actions to solidify the current higher education system such as setting a strategic planning, reinforcing the management, increasing capacity, assess and participation level.

The Ministry of Higher education has introduced a quality assurance mechanism to ensure that these universities comply with at least minimum international standards. National Accreditation Board (LAN) which has been transformed into Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) is the body that plays an important role to guarantee that educational programs offers by means of two major functions which are accreditation based on standards which are benchmarked international and developing and maintaining the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (Quality Assurance Division, n.d.).

According to quality assurance system, there are two components to be assessed namely (i) internal quality assessment and (ii) external quality assessment. The internal quality assurance in the institution plays a major role. There are nine areas of standards to be covered under internal quality assurance namely:

- (i) Vision, mission and objectives
- (ii) Design of the educational programme and teaching-learning methodology
- (iii) Student assessment
- (iv) Student selection and support system
- (v) Academic staff/faculty
- (vi) Educational resources
- (vii) Programme evaluation
- (viii) Leadership and governance
- (ix) Continuous quality improvement

All the areas are important. It is because the areas are related to each others in performing the quality standards of an institution. Each area is subdivided into specific criteria and also serves as performance indicators of quality in higher education. According to this system once the institution develops its own vision, mission, goals and learning objectives, then the institution will conduct a periodic self review to assess capabilities of each of the areas in supporting each others. Thus, the process will help the institution to specifically identify the strengths and weaknesses, and decision as if to make any changes. A task force will be set up by the institution to review the programmes. Before reviewing the programmes, the self study is conducted to collect data that compose all the nine areas mentioned. Then, the data are reviewed to identify strengths, weaknesses and problems to be addressed.

Besides that, the external quality assurance is about external review. This external review is monitored by the Quality Assurance Division for public universities. The process starts with the institution submits its self-study report and database to the Quality Assurance Division which will then be audited by panels of reviewers with the blended expertise. Usually a chairperson and

secretary will be appointed among the panels. Each panel is accountable to review a specific area and to spot issues pertaining to the institutional reports. They are professional, collegial and positive.

Hence, the institution will arrange a visit by these panel reviewers. It is a peer review process. It takes about more than a day for the panels to study and assess about the programmes, physical facilities, interaction with students, faculty, administrator and other relevant people. It is all about meeting the standards and objectives. Moreover, the visit by the panels is purposely to simplify the spot issues and justify other information. Take note that, the peer reviews visit will take place as if there are any spot areas to be concerned. Otherwise, visiting by this panel will be repeated after a periods of five years as satisfactorily of meeting the specified standards. The chairperson will declares an oral exit report to the institution and the panels will prepare an interim report purposely for corrective actions. Thus, the final report will then be prepared.

Relevancy to the submission of the Quality assurance report is to grant a confidence among the public by showing that quality of higher education in Malaysia still maintained and enhanced in accordance to quality standards. Furthermore, this report helps in providing continuous improvement of the teaching standards, scholarship and research and the learning experience among students.

PUBLIC EXPECTATION ON QUALITY EDUCATION

Ideally, it is important to have the understanding of customers' expectations, how it is developed and its relations to the service quality. Rowley (1997) argued that the direct recipients of the service determined the quality rather than other stakeholders. Lagrosen et al. (2004) discussed that managers of academic business schools have to perform well on the quality dimensions proposed as if they want to satisfy their students. In conjunction with this, Higher Institutions of learning have to ensure that they really perform this code of practice, Quality Assurance in Public Universities of Malaysia. Lately, there are numbers of changes in code of practice, Quality Assurance in Public Universities of Malaysia purposely making them become more accountable and to ensure continuous quality improvement. These guidelines are needed because their customers are now more knowledgeable, they demand great on quality education. After all, this code of practice, Quality Assurance in Public Universities of Malaysia is designed intentionally to promote public confidence that make the quality in higher education is being maintained.

With regard to maintain the public confidence, Public Universities of Malaysia have to assure that they have to address these matters wisely. In fact, Public Universities of Malaysia are very much affected as student diversity, demanding students, introduction of new technologies and etc. on the other words, in order to compete and survive in this globalization era, they have to keep themselves in line with the requirements introduced by the Ministry of Higher education. This is among the challenges that they need to face. They have to be sensitive to the issues.

CONCLUSION

Quality assurance has become the focal point and concern among HEI well as the ministry--MOHE. Various steps have been taken to strengthened policies and procedures in delivering efficient and effective education system to delight their customers especially the students. MOHE also has taken their responsibilities in solidifying higher education system so that Malaysia is known as an established education provider in the eye of the local as well as the international people. One of the techniques that being used is through the implementation of an accreditation agency called MQA. MQA is established to ensure that the educational programs offered are compatible with the standards required by the government. According to MQA, higher education providers are being assessed through internal quality and external quality criteria. It is highly expected that actions taken by MOHE will lead Malaysian education system into a better position. As of today, MOHE is still conducting audits on universities in Malaysia as to ascertain that they meet the standards and guidelines set forth by MOHE. It is hopeful that all universities in Malaysia will be honoured the accreditation of the MQA as to compete proactively with the global education industry.

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